The World of Foreign Books

FRENCH BOOKS. *Surveyed by A. G. H. SPIERS.*

Francis Carco, Novelist of the Underworld.

ONE of the duties which with the passing of time have fallen to the lot of the French Academy is the award of special prizes to works of literature of various kinds. This has not infrequently been a source of considerable embarrassment. The position of the Academy is in this respect unenviable. It has not only the guardianship of the dignity of French letters, but it also has, as one of its chief functions, the encouragement and progress of these letters. These two functions war with each other at times more particularly when the Forty Immortals are charged with distinguishing and rewarding young authors or those striving to strike out into new and unaccepted lines of literature. Such, for instance, was the case with Brieux, whose reception into the Academy was a matter of no small surprise to those who looked upon that institution as little more than a museum for the preservation of fossils. Brieux was, to be sure, a man of talent, serious, powerful, but entirely lacking in that grace and amenity which the traditional view associates with the real literary man of France. His plays might be good propaganda for science or sociology, but there were many in France who, traditionally conservative, refused to consider them as real literature.

The situation is somewhat similar in the case of the recent award of the *prix du roman*, which the French Academy has given to Francis Carco for his novel entitled "L'Homme traqué" (The Hounded Man). For some years, now, Francis Carco has been recognized by those interested in French literature as a writer to be watched. Three years ago a discerning critic classed him as one of the most interesting of the younger authors, who, though they had not yet written any really remarkable book, might one day achieve real distinction. At that time Carco had already written such works as the book of poetry, "Instincts," and the novels, "Les Innocents," "Jesus-la-Caille" and "Les Malheurs De Fernande," and these books had served to connect his name with writing of a certain kind, namely, the description of the underworld of Paris. Of these, the last two, later brought together with some abbreviation sc as to form a single novel bearing the title of the first, deal with the *apaches*, their female companions and other figures even less worthy of admiration according to conventional standards. The main story is that of Fernande, a wretched woman of the streets, who suffers from the enmity between the powerful and independent "M. Dominique" and the more sly "Pépé-la-Vache." She finally comes to hate the latter when she learns of his being a police spy and she gives herself up to the police to save the former, who has avenged himself by murdering his enemy.

What strikes the reader most in this novel is its moderation. The subject it treats might well lend itself to spectacular advertisement. It invites exaggeration. Carco, on the contrary, seems to avoid every form of appeal that does not come from the cool though not unsympathetic portrayal of the life he describes. He does, it is true, put before us remarkable scenes, such, for instance, as the fight between Fernande and another woman. But in these, as in his use of the language peculiar to his vulgar characters, Carco seems to avoid the extraordinary or the unusual whenever possible. His is the attitude of a calm realist as far from the sentimentality of the romantics as from the brutality of Zola and his school.

The fact is that Carco is more interested in human nature than in the picturesque or the spectacular. The human heart interests him; and it has been his lot to learn to know this heart in persons of the world he describes. In a recent article the critic Strowski gives us the following information upon him: "Francis Carco has known for a long time those characters whom we usually avoid. Belonging to a family of government officials he was born in Numea. When still a child he came in contact with those convicts who, out there, have created a morality and a law of their own. In Carco's family these were treated with the interest and pity which every human being deserves. Later Carco came to Paris, where he suffered poverty and in the Bohemia of 1912, 1913 and 1914 came to know men or boys resembling, not consciously but unconsciously, the convicts of Numea. He was neither frightened nor disgusted with them—nor did they attract him unduly. Having been accustomed to consider such beings as natural neighbors, though hardly to be recommended, he was able to study them without undue sentiment."

It is this calm realism and this broad sympathy that raise the books of Carco, for all the customary unpleasantness of the milieux which most of them depict, to the level of self-respecting literature. Carco himself is perhaps fully aware of this fact; for we note a progress in this direction as we look over the chronological list of his works. In "Jesus-la-Caille" certain passages reveal characters so inherently repulsive that they spoil momentarily the enjoyment of even the none too fastidious reader—passages which in spite of an essentially healthy treatment would in all probability make it impossible for the Academy to give any sort of official recognition to this novel. In subsequent books, however, such passages do not occur (at least they do not occur in the three works with which the present writer is familiar; he has had no acquaintance with a fourth work entitled "Rien qu'une femme.")

The best of these later books is, in the opinion of many, "l'Equipe" (the gang). Here again we find ourselves in a world of primitive instincts and unsophisticated human values. Ruse, brute strength, jealousy, hatred, instinctive compassion and a rough loyalty rule this world, as they do the world of the animals; and over them all, imparting to the whole a certain epic grandeur, broods a distinctly human passion: the torture of an elemental conscience. While Bouve has been in prison a rival gangster, Bobeche, has sought to usurp his position and his authority as head of a crew of thieves and thugs. On his release Bouve, whose life Bobeche has attempted, fights the latter on the banks of the Seine and throws his body into the river, thinking thus to regain the peaceful enjoyment of his former power. Unfortunately for him, however, he now falls a prey to an emotion as fundamental as any which have swayed him heretofore. Bobeche's aged mother, suspecting the truth, asks Bouve what he has done with her son, where he has put him. Bouve does not betray himself, but he is ever thereafter haunted by the memory of the piteous old woman. He finds rest only on the day when finally, in a scene during which he does not abandon his jeering and violence, he is forced to tell her the details of her son's death.

This study of primitive mentality is striking, and the novel in which it occurs is well constructed, holding the interest and satisfying the artistic sense by a good balance between the particular and the general. We can ourselves appreciate the compulsion under which Bouve acts, and yet at the same time we are convinced of the truth of the painting of human beings very different from ourselves. This is the Carco who knows the human being; it is also the Carco who is very familiar with the convicts, their manner of thought and their feelings.

Another of Carco's more recent books has a peculiar charm which will recommend it particularly to a certain class of readers. Though less even than "l'Equipe" in its technic the "Scenes de la Vie de Montmartre" represents with evident truth to inspiration (if not to detail) the sufferings of a young poet in the Bohemia of to-day at a moment when he is forced to realize that the hour of resignation, of lost illusions, of everyday humdrum toil has come. Carco shows us this Coquelet in love with his Irene, yet hurting himself and her; and describes his life amid a group of dreamers

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